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Published in:
Nineteenth-Century Music Criticism

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Final author's version (accepted by publisher, after peer review)

Publication date:
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Gessel, J. (2017). Speaking for Whom? Using Opera Reviews from Strasbourg (1887–1918) to Clarify the Problematical Source Character of Music Criticism. In T. Cascudo García-Villaraco (Ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Music Criticism* (pp. 77–100). (Music, Criticism & Politics; Vol. 3). Brepols Publishers.

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SPEAKING FOR WHOM? USING OPERA REVIEWS FROM STRASBOURG (1887–1918) TO CLARIFY THE PROBLEMATICAL SOURCE CHARACTER OF MUSIC CRITICISM

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DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR, and despite being relatively close to the front lines, the Strasbourg municipal theatre still managed to perform operas. It even succeeded in mounting works that were new to this local stage. On 14 October 1917, for instance, Jan Brandt Buys's *Die Schneider von Schönaue* received its Strasbourg premiere. As was usual, local papers reported in detail about the piece, the composer, the performance, and audience reaction. It comes as no surprise that critical opinion about the standard of performance and the quality of individual soloists was divided, but a close reading also reveals conflicting descriptions regarding basic facts. «Die Neuheit erfreute sich vor ausverkauftem Hause warmer Anerkennung und von Akt zu Akt sich steigernden Beifalls», the *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung* observed¹. The *Straßburger Post* painted a quite different picture: «Das Stück fand eine freundliche, wenn auch kaum besonders warme Aufnahme durch das nicht allzu zahlreich erschienene Publikum»².

One might argue that some degree of subjectivity will always play a part in describing audience reaction, but whether the house is sold-out or not is just a matter of fact. In this case, the box office reports confirm that the latter report was actually closer to the truth than the former³. In short, the example shows that taking press reports at face value is not advisable.

This, however, is a problematical conclusion, because taking recourse to historical press coverage is often an essential tool for engaging with the social or cultural history

¹. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 15 October 1917. Translation: «The novelty enjoyed the warm appreciation of the sold-out house and the applause increased with each act».

². *Straßburger Post*, 15 October 1917. Translation: «The piece was received friendly, though not very warmly by an audience that had not turned up in very large numbers».

³. Box office reports season 1917–1918, 14 October 1917; Archives Municipales de Strasbourg (hereafter AMS) 616MW44.

of nineteenth-century music. More often than not it is the only source that may corroborate, contradict, expand, or differentiate what ego documents or archives from music institutions tell us. The value of press reviews for a reconstruction of late nineteenth-century daily operatic practice in Strasbourg seems to confirm these observations: although the theatre's archives are quite extensive, they are silent about things like audience reaction and details of staging and performance. We therefore have to rely on newspaper reviews to inform us about these aspects. But, as the quotes from above show, we also have to ask ourselves to which degree press reviews might be considered trustworthy sources.

The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann has argued that both the question and its possible answers are irrelevant⁴. Media, he states, put us in a double bind: on the one hand we need them to be informed, but on the other hand we cannot be certain that we are informed correctly. Instead, media produce a double reality: the first one consists of a sequence of operations, meaning that there is an incessant stream of texts and images, the second one is a sequence of observations («Beobachtungen»), which result in what to media users appears to be reality. This reality, however, is nothing but the sum of observations about the world around us. Luhmann does not deny that there is a real world that exists around us, but insists that it is only accessible to us through observation and that increased knowledge does not consist in getting closer to this real world, but in making sense of the constantly growing number of observations, which are often related to each other. Our sense of reality is therefore limited to making sense of the conflicting observations⁵. In other words: as users we create a «common sense» reality from media observations, but media do not construct a fixed or uniform reality. Therefore, Luhmann posits, the well-known criticism that «the media» often present us with a distorted version of reality is fundamentally misleading.

This may come across somewhat abstract and vague, but can be clarified by returning to the quotes mentioned above. Taken together, they do not create a reality of which anyone can make sense — was the house sold-out or not? By relying on another source and concluding which one of both reviews gave a correct account of the facts, I have not established a truth (or reality), but only demonstrated under which circumstances I am prepared to assume that there is sufficient basis to know what happened in reality, although there is no logic imaginable which would prove beyond a doubt that box office reports are more reliable sources than press reviews. In fact, they are also media to me, because they too are reports about something from which I was absent (I did not attend the performance, nor was I present when the daily take was counted) and as such they meet the primary requirement Luhmann sees for defining something as media: there

⁴. LUHMANN 1996, pp. 15, 20.

⁵. *Ibidem*, pp. 9-23.

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can be no direct contact between the observer (reader/viewer of media) and the event a medium reports about⁶.

Instead of trying to ascertain to which extent media, including opera reviews, can be trusted, it is more useful to establish how they produce their observations and to examine their relations with their surroundings. That will be the aim of this essay, which will begin with an overview of the newspapers, the reviewers, and their self image. Then attention will concentrate on the relations between the press and the theatre management and the local authority, the artistic personnel, and the audience.

NEWSPAPERS AND OPERA CRITICS IN STRASBOURG (1886–1918)

In 1886, the year the Strasbourg municipal theatre came under direct control of the municipal authority, three local newspapers were available in the capital of the Alsace-Lorraine: the *Straßburger Post*, the *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten* and the bilingual *Elsässer Journal*, which was later renamed *Journal d'Alsace et de Lorraine*⁷. Following its name change it was the sole newspaper that appeared only in French. It catered especially to the so-called «alt-Elsässer», the mainly French-speaking part of the population that had remained more or less openly loyal to France after the German annexation of the Alsace-Lorraine region in 1871. Additions came in 1892 with the *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung* and in 1898 with the *Freie Presse* and *Der Volksbote*. After the turn of century more newspapers were founded, such as *Der Elsässer*, the *Straßburger neue Zeitung*, the *Straßburger Zeitung*, and the *Straßburger Rundschau*. This increase in newspapers was partly due to the retraction of repressive press laws in 1898, but also motivated by the spectacular growth of the population from about 86,000 in 1871 to nearly 180,000 in 1910⁸.

The political orientation of the papers rarely spilled over into the opera reviews. Rare exceptions can be found in the early years of the socialist *Freie Presse*, with one of its first critics, Godefroy Latour, praising Lortzing as the sole «proletarian genius» among the great composers⁹. Two years later his successor found warm words for Charpentier's *Louise*, because he approved of what he saw as the composer's attempt to solve the contemporary question of the proletariat through music¹⁰. The views of his successor, however, who used the alias «Beckmesser» and was active as opera critic from 1907 to 1913, would have been more suited for the German nationalist orientation of the *Straßburger Post* than for a socialist newspaper.

⁶. *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁷. See also IGRSHEIM 2002, pp. 55–64.

⁸. UBERFILL 2001, p. 45.

⁹. *Freie Presse*, 15 December 1899.

¹⁰. *Freie Presse*, 21 April 1902.

The size of the reviews could vary from around two hundred to two thousand words, but reviews of the latter size appeared only in the *Freie Presse*, the *Journal d'Alsace et de Lorraine*, the *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, the *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, and the *Straßburger Post*. Especially the longer ones routinely started with a substantial introduction about the composer and/or the work, even when the latter belonged to the so-called 'Repertoireopern' — pieces that were performed almost every season, mostly without special preparation — and would therefore have been well-known to both audiences and readers. After the introduction the critics would assess the performance of the soloists in great detail and would close their account with some short remarks about the conductor, the orchestra, and the staging, mostly to point out errors or inconsistencies in the sets or the acting. Since the theatre would mount each season 35 to 45 different operas, most newspapers published a similar number of reviews per season; repeat performances, even those with different soloists, were rarely reviewed. This means that, given the number of local newspapers after 1900, per season on average three to four hundred opera reviews were written. (All newspapers had separate critics to review the plays the theatre staged.)

In spite of these impressive numbers we are poorly informed about the identity of the Strasbourg critics. The majority signed only with an initial («A.R.») or used an alias, such as «Erasmus», who wrote for the *Volksbote* from 1898 until 1902. Only in one case the person behind the alias could be identified: the local politician Thomas Seltz wrote under the pen name «Paul Lainé» (probably a deliberate misspelling of «Paul l'Ainé», or «Paul, the Elder») from 1900 until 1910 in *Der Elsässer*¹¹. Other identifiable critics were Gustav Altmann (*Straßburger Zeitung*, 1900–1903; *Straßburger Post*, 1906–1918), Fritz Brust (*Der Volksbote*, 1905–1908; *Straßburger neue Zeitung*, 1911–1918), Johannes Fabian (*Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 1897–1903), Godefroy Latour (*Freie Presse*, 1899–1900), Stanislaus Schlesinger (*Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 1903–1918), and Rudolf Thiele (*Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 1893–1898). Three of these were professional musicians: Schlesinger and Thiele earned their living as singing teacher, Fabian advertised with general music lessons. Brust was the only musicologist among them: in 1909 he had obtained a doctorate from the Strasbourg University for his thesis on contemporary music aesthetics¹². Fabian was the only one among them who was also active as a composer. One of his works, the oriental fairytale opera *Nuredin*, was performed by the Strasbourg theatre in the season 1901–1902, although with very little success. The others seem to have been amateurs, like Altmann, a medical doctor who specialized in cancer treatment.

Whatever else we know about the Strasbourg critics comes from asides in their writings, in which they referred to their musical experiences. In 1905, after a performance

¹¹. SCHRODA 2008, p. 27.

¹². BRUST 1910.

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of Verdi's *Troubadour*¹³, the anonymous reviewer from the *Straßburger Post* stated that he had loved the piece when he first heard it, forty years ago, but that shortly afterwards he had come under the spell of Bayreuth. Consequently, his fondness of Verdi's works had suffered¹⁴. A week later, he casually remarked that he had been active as a critic for nearly twenty five years and that in 1875 he had been among the principal supporters of the Bayreuth festival and the first performances of the *Ring des Nibelungen*¹⁵. Almost simultaneously, one of his colleagues noted that a performance of *Die Stumme von Portici* had awakened memories of the 1860's, when he had been in contact with many who had lived through the revolutions of 1830 and 1848¹⁶.

Further evidence of the experience and erudition of the critics provide the constant references to other performances, mostly in Germany and Austria, and to other musicians. The solo personnel's achievements in lead roles were regularly weighed up by the critics against those of the internationally famous vocalists who would come to Strasbourg to sing their favourite parts in special guest performances. Also nearly all Strasbourg opera conductors were at some time or another compared with famous counterparts such as Hans von Bülow, Hermann Levi, Felix Mottl, Hans Richter, Richard Strauss, or Bruno Walter. Especially Gustav Altmann regularly mentioned his trips to other cities and shared his impressions, sometimes to the extent that they took up more space than the actual performance review. In December 1907 he curtailed his assessment of a *Walküre* performance in order to expatiate about the performances of *Salome* he had seen in Dresden and Mannheim¹⁷. Less than two weeks later he included in his review of its Strasbourg premiere parts of a conversation he had had with Strauss¹⁸.

The many comparisons with leading musicians of their age show that the Strasbourg critics did not have a narrow-minded provincial mentality, but were well aware of contemporary musical developments in Europe. They cemented that image by regularly referring to other prominent critics and music historians. Both Thomas Seltz as well as the first critics of the *Freie Presse* regularly quoted Hanslick¹⁹. They were hardly the only ones to base their judgment on the writings of others. Most often cited were, as might be expected, Wagner's treatises. Among the many other authors the Strasbourg critics liked to invoke figured Richard Batka, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Otto Gumprecht, Wilhelm Kienzl, Heinrich Köstlin, Albert Lavignac, Henri Lichtenberger, Franz Liszt, Rudolf Louis, Emil Ludwig, Adolf Bernhard Marx, Hermann Mendel, Otto Neitzel,

¹³. As a reminder that nearly all works in Strasbourg were at the time performed in German, the German titles are given.

¹⁴. *Straßburger Post*, 13 October 1905.

¹⁵. *Straßburger Post*, 20 October 1905.

¹⁶. *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 10 October 1905.

¹⁷. *Straßburger Post*, 3 December 1907.

¹⁸. *Straßburger Post*, 16 December 1907.

¹⁹. *Freie Presse*, 31 December 1898, 28 February 1899, 14 March 1899; *Der Elsässer*, 16 October 1903.

Carlo Perinello, Ferdinand Pfohl, Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, Hugo Riemann, Karl Storck, Edouard Schuré, and Hans von Wolzogen. Thus the local critics strove to show that their opinions were not personal statements, but contributions to the national and international debate on musical developments.

The self-defined codes of conduct with which some critics started their activities explain the need to foreground their erudition and their experience. Before taking up his job as opera critic, the anonymous «Dr. M.B.» pointed out that as far as the repertoire and newer works were concerned, it was his job to separate the fashionable and ephemeral ones from those with true lasting artistic value and to see that the latter were done as much justice as local circumstances would allow. The artistic personnel should not take any of his comments as condemnation of their efforts, but realize that they were only contributions to the good cause of the theatre as local art institution²⁰. Quite similar was what his colleague from the *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung* had to say. The theatre, he claimed, was the best place to decide about the true value of art works and critics were best equipped to establish what their beauties and weaknesses were, because in his opinion they were also true artists, who felt as deeply about art as the performers. In addition, they should counsel aspiring performers, helping them to improve their performances. Of course, the true critic did all this in the name of art alone²¹. Seven years later, the new critic of the *Straßburger Zeitung* summarized his duties along similar lines and stressed that he would give an unbiased account of his impressions and objections²². Thomas Seltz primarily thought of himself as an assistant as well, who would help the audience to understand the personality and the choices of each artist²³.

To summarize this group portrait: the majority of the Strasbourg critics were, as far as can be established with certainty, not professional musicians but passionate music lovers, mostly with extensive experience and a keen interest in music literature, who considered themselves an integral part of local artistic practice, because they put their insights on offer to further the good cause of art.

To which degree this group portrait conformed to local critical practice in Germany (or Europe) cannot be determined easily, because there is not much research that focuses on music journalism from this perspective. However, a comparison with the community of critics in late nineteenth-century Vienna does seem to confirm Dahlhaus's thesis that the opinion of «educated dilettante» carried more weight than the views of the professional musician, who was often seen as uncultured and not very knowledgeable when it came

²⁰. *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 17 September 1904.

²¹. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 19 September 1900.

²². *Straßburger Zeitung*, 16 September 1907. For a similar example see *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 17 September 1906.

²³. *Der Elsässer*, 17 September 1902.

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to aesthetic matters²⁴. Moreover, the pedagogical impetus of music criticism that was so important to many of the Strasbourg critics does not seem to have been particularly unique. It can be traced not only in the work of other individual critics, as Teresa Cascudo has shown in her study of the activities of the Madrid critic Miguel Salvador²⁵, but also, as Katharine Ellis has demonstrated for nineteenth-century French music criticism, in a larger community of critics²⁶.

PRESS RELATIONS WITH THE MUNICIPAL AUTHORITY AND THE THEATRE MANAGEMENT

This case study about the Strasbourg theatre starts in 1886, because in this year the theatre came under direct control of the municipal authority. The cause was quite mundane: a series of illnesses among the solo personnel had brought opera production to a halt, forcing the theatre's director Hermann Temmel to hand in his resignation. Although the municipal council was reluctant to take control, it finally did so, because closing the theatre was considered unacceptable. Although it was initially supposed to be only a temporary measure, it then turned into a permanent one, because the *Statthalter*, the semi-autonomous ruler of the Alsace-Lorraine who was directly appointed by the German emperor and who answered only to him, had promised substantial financial support for the theatre, on the condition that the city remain in charge and would focus more on opera production.

The consequences were far-reaching. Until then the Strasbourg theatre had been run like basically all local theatres (*Stadttheater*) in Germany: the municipal authority leased the house to a theatrical entrepreneur, who mounted a contractually arranged number of performances per season. Now that the municipal authority was in charge, the director's rights were severely restricted. A special theatre committee was created, filled with members of the municipal council and chaired by the mayor. It had the last word over all decisions that somehow might have financial consequences, meaning that it controlled all negotiations over soloist contracts, the acquisition of new works, and the production of new stage materials. Within a few years its influence had expanded into the selection of the repertoire, the schedule of play, and the distribution of the roles. This development intensified after the election of Rudolf Schwander as mayor in 1906. Whereas his predecessor Otto Back had tended to limit his involvement in the theatre's affairs to the minimum, Schwander took a quite different approach and often intervened personally in the theatre's management²⁷.

²⁴. MACGOLL 1996, pp. 11–32. DAHLHAUS 1968, pp. 157–172. See for further examples ELLIS 2001 and WALTON 2001.

²⁵. CASCUDO 2012.

²⁶. ELLIS 1995, pp. 235–237.

²⁷. For a summary of the theatre's history between 1870 and 1918 see VAN GESSEL 2010. For a detailed account: VAN GESSEL 2014.

With the city in direct control of the theatre, the press could now address any complaints about the standard of artistic production not only to the director, but also to the municipal authority. In the years following the take-over by the city, however, no such thing happened. Instead relations between the press and the municipal authority were rather cordial, partly because of the family ties between one of the municipal council's aldermen, Gustave Fischbach, and the editors of the *Elsässer Journal*. It was also helpful that the new theatre director Alexander Hessler had a knack for feeding the local press appealing copy. During his short tenure he would always see to it that his speeches to the complete artistic personnel at the beginning of preparations for the next season got published in the *Elsässer Journal*. Their mixture of seriousness and matter-of-factness made them particularly suited to demonstrate to the Strasbourg population that all performers were serious, hard-working, and devoted to their art²⁸.

In the years preceding the takeover the local press had never even considered petitioning the municipality to step in, because such an administrative structure was highly unusual at the time — it existed only in Mannheim and Freiburg. Instead of complaining about the theatre's limited resources, the press had advised the theatre directors to accept the inevitable and to refrain from mounting demanding works like *Die Hugenotten*²⁹. The *Elsässer Journal* recommended openly that the theatre should limit itself to producing more modest works, like comic operas (*Spieloper*)³⁰. It is therefore quite understandable that when the theatre reopened its doors after the takeover, one critic spoke of an almost sacred, solemn feeling that filled the auditorium, now that it had become the official local temple for the arts³¹.

In line with the increasing focus on opera that the *Statthalter* had wanted in return for his financial backing, the municipal authority also increased its own contribution to the theatre's budget, allowing the theatre to mount works that until then had not or only rarely been performed in Strasbourg. The change in repertoire and the larger number of soloists that now had to be engaged were gratefully acknowledged by the local press, which lauded the city for its artistic commitment and pointed to the wonderful results it had produced. In 1886, one critic remarked, the season had started with Millöcker's *Gasparone*, in 1887 the opening performance had been Mozart's *Figaros Hochzeit*, and now, in 1888, he felt immense pride to see the theatre bill announce Wagner's *Lohengrin*. He continued: «Das alte 'noblesse oblige' gilt wieder für das Theater der Landeshauptstadt von Elsaß-Lothringen, und daß die städtische Verwaltung, deren ebenso kunstsinnigem als opferbereitem Eintreten wir diesen Umschwung verdanken, sich in ihrer Berechnung

²⁸. See e.g. *Elsässer Journal*, 9 November 1886, 27 September 1887, 27 September 1888.

²⁹. *Elsässer Journal*, 7 November 1886.

³⁰. *Elsässer Journal*, 16 November 1886.

³¹. *Straßburger Post*, 5 November 1886.

nicht getäuscht hatte, bewies gleich der Erfolg dieses ersten Abends auch den hartnäckigen Zweiflern an dem Gelingen dieses hochherzigen Versuchs»³².

With such gratitude dominating, it comes as no surprise that critics more than once took it upon themselves to defend the municipal authority and the theatre management against what were in their mind quite unreasonable demands from the audience. The complaints in letters to the editor about the lack of operas by the then immensely popular composer Viktor Nessler in the repertoire were simply wrong and misplaced, the *Elsässer Journal* stated bluntly, because they were to be performed later in the season³³. In the *Straßburger Post* a similar tone prevailed when some members of the audience reproached the management with failing to hold on to the best soloists. They were firmly lectured by the paper's critic, who stated upfront that it was none of their business. The theatre's management, he claimed, was responsible for the standards of performance and therefore had the sole right to decide who it wanted to hire³⁴.

Consequently, in 1890 the prevailing harmony between press and municipal authority prompted an anonymous opera goer to complain in a letter to the editor about the lack of critical acumen in the Strasbourg opera reviews. Professional and accurate criticism, the author claimed, would benefit the theatre much more than the current continuous adulation. When every review showers praise on the soloists, he continued, nobody will take them seriously anymore and this would be a shame, because the audience might also stop paying attention to the truly remarkable achievements of individual artists³⁵.

The first paper to pick up this cue was the *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*. January 1894 the paper published a quite critical overview of the general standards of performance and concluded that much improvement was needed: «Wir wollen eine hervorragende Bühne und keine musikalisch-deklamatorische Anfängerversuchsstation»³⁶. In other words, now that the theatre had begun to gain some artistic repute, the critics, no longer prepared to accept the modest possibilities of the recent past, started to raise the bar, knowing full well that they needed to address their complaints to the members of the theatre committee, «who are apparently sitting most close to the Parnassus»³⁷.

³². *Straßburger Post*, 1 October 1888. Translation: «The 'noblesse oblige' of old has again become valid for the theatre of the regional capital of the Alsace Lorraine, and that the municipal authority, to whose both artistic as well as generous deeds we owe this transformation, has made the right decision, was proven immediately by the success of this opening night, even to those who stubbornly had kept doubting whether this magnanimous endeavour would succeed».

³³. *Elsässer Journal*, 12 October 1888.

³⁴. *Straßburger Post*, 2 January 1893.

³⁵. *Elsässer Journal*, 3 March 1890.

³⁶. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 22 January 1894. Translation: «What we want is a first-class house and not a try-out stage for beginners in music and declamation».

³⁷. *Ibidem*.

Without question the sternest critic was Gustav Altmann, who wrote initially for the *Straßburger Zeitung*. He repeatedly complained about the poor singing or acting skills of some of the soloists and often pointed to inconsistencies in the staging; in general a favourite target for the local critics. Moreover, he did not shun drastic images, declaring for instance that a certain singer was just as unsuited to perform in serious opera as a furnace pipe would be in a horn quartet³⁸. It was such language that prompted the entire solo personnel and the three conductors to send a request to the mayor's office, in which they demanded that Altmann be made to step down as critic³⁹. The mayor passed it on to the general editor of the *Straßburger Zeitung*, who apparently responded that he was unhappy about the tone of Altmann's reviews as well and that he had already decided to have him replaced⁴⁰. Altmann, of course, did not agree with the petition and defended himself in his next review, arguing that if emperors, kings, politicians, and scientist could be subject to public scrutiny, then no logic could demand that artist would have a right to be exempted from the same fate⁴¹.

In the long run it did not help the personnel much that Altmann was forced to step down, because in 1906 he was hired again to write reviews, now for the *Straßburger Post*. Although he repeatedly assured his readers that he just wanted to lend a helping hand, his remarks were still often perceived as too harsh. The aggravation they caused was touched upon in the municipal council, where one of its members, although without mentioning Altmann by name, derided him openly and concluded his remarks about the opera reviews in local press thus: «Ich kann es fast bedauern, daß noch keiner unserer neuzeitlichen Künstler es gemacht hat, wie einer ihrer früheren Theaterkollegen vor dem Jahre 1870, der einen damals berühmten Theaterkritiker windelweich durchprügelte (große Heiterkeit) und dadurch seine Kollegen vor weiteren ungerechten Angriffen befreite»⁴². Mayor Rudolf Schwander deplored the sharpness of these remarks, stating that it was inappropriate to attack individual persons, because they could not defend themselves. However, he did concede that he too would appreciate a more supportive and considerate mentality among local critics⁴³. His consideration with Altmann was not shared by the municipal council though; one member stated outright that there was no need to hold back, because press people always had the last word and were therefore in a good position to defend their interests⁴⁴.

³⁸. Oskar Jerschke to Schwander, 7 February 1912; AMS 180MW98.

³⁹. Request by the solo personnel and the conductors of the Strasbourg theatre, addressed to Otto Back, 26 September 1902; AMS 180MW97.

⁴⁰. Gloss on the request, 18 November 1902; AMS 180MW97.

⁴¹. *Straßburger Zeitung*, 18 October 1902.

⁴². Session of the Municipal Council, 20 January 1909; *Verhandlungen des Gemeinderats der Stadt Straßburg im Jahre 1909*, Strasbourg, Singer, 1910, p. 64. Translation: «I almost regret that none of our contemporary artists have acted like some of their predecessors before 1870, who beat a then famous theatre critic black and blue (great hilarity), thus saving his colleagues from further unjust attacks».

⁴³. *Ibidem*, p. 65.

⁴⁴. *Ibidem*, p. 66.

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A few months later the theatre committee took the matter up, but concluded that it had no power to intervene and that discussions with local newspaper editors were not likely to improve matters⁴⁵. The frustration over the local opera critics did not subside, because a couple of years later the theatre committee debated the matter several times. Once again it concluded that it could not remedy the situation, even though it agreed that most reviews were incorrect and overly sharp⁴⁶. And so it stayed until the end, as a gloss by Schwander from 1918 shows: nowhere in Germany, he wrote, were local critics so prickly and insulting⁴⁷.

It comes as no surprise that the municipal authority's frustration with the local opera critics was shared by the theatre's management. Responding to questions from the mayor's office about a very negative review concerning a production of Schiller's *Jungfrau von Orleans*, Maximilian Wilhelmi, director at the time, remarked that this play was extremely difficult to stage. Nevertheless, he continued, the theatre was prepared to perform it, because of the audience's fondness of Schiller's works, which was not affected by a few imperfections. As proof he pointed to the good box office results of the repeat performances. His conclusion summed up his bitterness about the local critics: «Das Straßburger Publikum hat sich also durch die Schimpfereien der Presse, die in Oper wie Schauspiel so gut wie alles verreit, [...] nicht abhalten lassen, sich an seinem Schiller zu erfreuen und zu begeistern, auch wenn er nicht in einer durchweg mustergltigen Weise aufgefhrt werden kann»⁴⁸.

That conclusion shows how little remained of the harmonious atmosphere between the press and the municipal authority that had dominated the first years after the theatre's takeover by the city. Both the theatre management as well as the municipal authority had become increasingly frustrated with what they perceived as unreasonably sharp and offensive criticism of their artistic endeavours. Frustration also prevailed among the critics, who complained time and again that those in charge remained deaf to their well-meant advice. Already during his second season as opera critic Altmann mentioned that he had got used to seeing his recommendations routinely being interpreted as malicious and heartless⁴⁹. Nine years later he once again urged the municipality to take the warnings from the press about much needed improvement in the repertoire and the schedule seriously⁵⁰. He hardly was the only one to do so. *Der Volksbote* noted: «[D]ie Direktion setzt sich ber die Presse

⁴⁵. Meeting of the theatre committee, 7 October 1909; AMS 180MW24.

⁴⁶. Meeting of the theatre committee, 14 April, 17 May, 9 September 1915; AMS 180MW26.

⁴⁷. Gloss by Schwanders on a memorandum by theatre director Anton Otto, 18 February 1918; AMS 180MW164.

⁴⁸. Wilhelmi to Schwander, 2 December 1912; AMS 180MW15. Translation: «The constant slander in the press, which reviles almost all opera and play performances, [...] has not deterred the Strasbourg audience from enjoying and enthusing about its Schiller, even when the performance is not exemplary in every respect».

⁴⁹. *Straburger Zeitung*, 1 November 1901.

⁵⁰. *Straburger Post*, 28 December 1910.

und ihr Urtheil mit einer Wurstigkeit hinweg, die diese sich anstandshalber nicht länger mehr gefallen lassen darf⁵¹. In perfect accord was what his embittered colleague from the *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung* remarked: the critic is always wrong⁵². Occasionally, one reviewer stated, the job of the critic could be gratifying,

[...] [a]ber manchmal möchte auch dem abgebrühtesten Rezensenten eine tiefe Mutlosigkeit überkommen, wenn er sieht, wie *nutzlos* im Grunde genommen selbst die ernsthaftesten, uneigennützigsten und aufrichtigsten Bemühungen um die Kunst bleiben, wie man Jahr aus, Jahr ein auf die nämlichen Mängel und Fehler hinweisen kann, ohne daß alles Mahnen und Warnen auch nur den leisesten Widerhall bei denen fände, die an erste Stelle zu verantwortlichen Hütern der Kunst bestellt sind⁵³.

PRESS RELATIONS WITH THE ARTISTIC PERSONNEL

The relations between press and the artistic personnel were, as might be expected, dominated by the former's verdict of the latter. Those who received praise, enjoyed the critical acclaim, those who did not, resented the negative judgements. It is, however, much more interesting to explore to which extent the reviews bear witness of the assistance that the critics, in accordance with their self-understanding, professed to offer.

If there was one steady stream of critical comments, then it was targeted at the stage directors. Over the years the critics repeatedly pointed to discrepancies in the sets and the staging: what was supposed to be the medieval hut of a hermit in *Der Templer und die Jüdin*, one critic protested, looked like a bourgeois drawing room, graced with comfortable accessories like a coffee machine⁵⁴. Others complained that the ship in *Tristan und Isolde* looked like a steamboat with an iron railing⁵⁵, or that the temple in *Samson und Dalila* had decorations from classical antiquity, although the story played somewhere around 1150 BC⁵⁶. When in a production of *Der Rattenfänger von Hameln* almost no rats were visible, one critic stated that under these circumstances the refusal of the town council to pay the

⁵¹. *Der Volksbote*, 13 October 1902. Translation: «The management ignores the press and its opinions with an indifference that it should no longer accept».

⁵². *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 6 November 1900.

⁵³. *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 17 February 1908. Translation: «[But] time and again even the most imperturbable critic will be overcome by desperation, when he realizes, how *pointless* basically even the most serious, the most generous, and the sincerest pursuits for the sake of art are, when one is identifying year after year the same shortcomings and mistakes, when all alerts and warnings are never taken to heart by those, to whom first and foremost the responsibility has been assigned to be custodians of art».

⁵⁴. *Elsässer Journal*, 9 February 1889.

⁵⁵. *Elsässer Journal*, 8 February 1890.

⁵⁶. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 11 October 1901.

piper did indeed make sense⁵⁷. In this case, those responsible did indeed listen to the press's suggestions, because when the opera was performed three years later, there was praise for the realistic look of the new rats⁵⁸. Given the fact that such complaints became ever rarer over the years, it is not too far-fetched to assume that the stage designers did profit from hints in the reviews. Indeed, when the critic of the *Freie Presse* praised the improvements in the staging of *Tannhäuser*, he had no qualms about claiming that the reason for this positive development was the theatre management's preparedness to finally pay attention to the advice he had been giving untiringly over the preceding years⁵⁹.

The soloists surely had the press on their side when it came to circumventing what critics considered misplaced censorship. This happened for instance when the theatre's management had suppressed, most probably at the behest of the municipal authority, an inserted verse for the popular farce *Robert und Bertram*, in which the city architect's new design for one of the city's bridges was mocked. The *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung* published it, and openly condemned the authority's actions⁶⁰. The press also defended the interests of the soloists when it criticized insufficient preparations that caused the performers real bodily harm, for instance when in *Das Rheingold* the harnesses of the Rhine maidens were not properly anchored, causing one singer to fall several feet⁶¹, or when live weapons were used instead of fake ones⁶². When a critic urged the theatre management to engage a greater number of soloists, he too stated that the well-being of the soloists was his primary concern: the increased number of opera performances would force the already present soloists to sing on too many consecutive evenings and thereby overstrain their voices⁶³. But also when it came to judging the singing itself, the press did stress that it wanted to help.

This was especially palpable in the repeated advice to avoid too frequent use of the full voice, meaning that critics urged singers to use on principal the lighter voice with only head resonance and to add the chest resonance only occasionally. Accordingly, the theatre's lead tenor was advised not to take on big parts until he had changed his singing technique. Otherwise, the critic feared, his false use of the chest voice might cause him to lose his otherwise fine voice⁶⁴. An auditioning singer was criticized as well for her tendency «d'user trop fréquemment dans les notes hautes de la voix mixte, alors qu'elle aurait tout avantage à employer la voix de tête»⁶⁵. Altmann, who might have profited from his wife's expertise, who taught singing at the Strasbourg conservatoire, joined in with

⁵⁷. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 30 March 1894.

⁵⁸. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 24 September 1897.

⁵⁹. *Freie Presse*, 17 September 1906.

⁶⁰. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 5 February 1894.

⁶¹. *Straßburger Post*, 13 May 1901; *Straßburger Zeitung*, 16 May 1901.

⁶². *Straßburger Post*, 16 February 1903.

⁶³. *Straßburger Post*, 12 October 1896.

⁶⁴. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 17 October 1898.

⁶⁵. *Journal d'Alsace et de Lorraine*, 6 May 1903.

similar advice for a new soloist: «Sie singt viel zu viel mit dem starken Register und benutzt zu wenig die Kopfstimme: das ist der sicherste Weg, um das Organ zur Ermüdung, zum Detonieren und schließlich zu noch Schlimmerem gelangen zu lassen»⁶⁶. Four weeks later he reiterated his warning that with her excessive use of the full voice she was abusing her vocal capacities⁶⁷. Especially the two singing teachers among the critics, Rudolf Thiele and Stanislaus Schlesinger, did not hold back with detailed technical suggestions for vocal improvement, but they were not the only ones to do so. It also applied to an anonymous critic, who remarked about the incorrect tone production of one singer that she should get rid of her habit of singing the louder notes with a «gummy tone» («Gaumenton»), explaining to his readers that this meant that the back of her tongue was pressing too much on the top of the larynx⁶⁸.

But every now and then the judgement of the achievements of the soloists did indeed become acerbic, and especially Altmann was guilty of this. The request by the solo personnel mentioned above had been triggered by his verdict on a member that had sung the role of Marke, which was worded thus:

«Es gibt keinen Sänger an unserer Bühne, den Chor inbegriffen, der sein Organ so wenig zu handhaben weiß, wie jener; diese Manier, mit dem Kraftaufwand des ganzen Körpers zu singen und die tragische Ergriffenheit mit der Stimmgebung eines Berserkers zu illustrieren, erzeugt so abstoßende Effekte, daß man über die Toleranz des Dirigenten demgegenüber erstaunt»⁶⁹. Such criticisms, the petitioners claimed, went far beyond the normal evaluations they were used to. Instead, these were just personal insults⁷⁰. They were probably not impressed by Altmann's claim, that some people just did not understand his sometimes slightly prickly humour⁷¹.

Some soloists were indeed overly sensitive of even the slightest hint at any shortcomings on their part. In 1918 a singer refused to perform, arguing that her period had started earlier than she had expected — at the time that was considered a valid reason to excuse the female soloists from their duties. When Anton Otto, at the time the theatre's director, learned that the singer had lied about this, he suspected that there were other

⁶⁶. *Straßburger Post*, 21 September 1906. Translation: «She is singing too much with the stronger voice and uses the head voice too little: that will surely strain the voice, cause intonation problems and in the end even worse things».

⁶⁷. *Straßburger Post*, 15 October 1906.

⁶⁸. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 22 October 1902.

⁶⁹. *Straßburger Zeitung*, 24 September 1902. Translation: «There is no other singer on our stage, and that includes the choir, who is so incapable of controlling his voice as he is; this manner of singing with all the force of the entire body and of depicting the tragic pathos with the vocal production of a madman creates such repulsive results, that one can only be astonished by the conductor's tolerance of it».

⁷⁰. Request by the solo personnel and the conductors of the Strasbourg theatre, addressed to Otto Back, 26 September 1902; AMS 180MW97.

⁷¹. *Straßburger Zeitung*, 18 October 1902.

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reasons for her refusal to perform. This was confirmed by another singer, who told him that she probably wasn't willing to perform because of the review in yesterday's *Straßburger Post*⁷². But the only critical remark in the review was that she might have sung her part with a little bit more vocal vigour⁷³. An almost identical case is presented by the letter in which the singer Ernestine Croissant complained bitterly to Hans Pfitzner, opera director in Strasbourg from 1910 until 1916, about Altmann's judgement of her rendition of Octavian in the Strasbourg premiere of *Der Rosenkavalier*: «Ich finde es von Altmann zum Mindesten ungerecht, dass er bei einer Rolle wie der 'Octavian' bei einer so anstrengenden und gesanglich undankbaren Partie mir den ganzen Erfolg vernichtet, durch seine boshafte Kritik meiner hohen Töne. Er schädigt mich dadurch auf das empfindlichste»⁷⁴. But Altmann had praised both her acting and her handling of the «difficult vocal task», and only criticized that occasionally some shrillness in her high notes had been noticeable⁷⁵.

It would, however, be wrong to assume that relations between artists and the press were dominated by antagonism alone. Although the theatre's archives contain few clues, it does appear that some artists cultivated good relations with at least some of the critics, probably to further their interests and quite possibly also with the intent to damage their colleagues. The latter case has been documented for one of the stage directors, Paul Legband, who colluded with a critic of the *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten* in a concerted effort to bring down the theatre's director Anton Otto⁷⁶. Another document suggests that the practice of ensuring the support of individual critics by the soloists was actually quite normal. It is a letter from a singer who had come to Strasbourg for a trial performance, but decided to withdraw her candidature. She motivated her decision by referring to the Strasbourg solo personnel's habit of conspiring with individual members of the press⁷⁷.

THE PRESS AND THE AUDIENCE

Each time the press claimed that the municipal authority or the theatre management ought to take them seriously, they argued that they were speaking on behalf of the audience. As the critic from *Der Volksbote* wrote, the press was the embodiment of

⁷². Otto to Schwander, 28 February 1918; AMS 180MW99.

⁷³. *Straßburger Post*, 25 February 1918.

⁷⁴. Croissant to Pfitzner, 3 October 1912; Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Vienna, F68. Pfitzner.1526/4. Translation: «I find it on Altmann's part unjust to say the least, that considering a role like that of Octavian, such a demanding and vocally ungrateful part, he ruins my success totally with his malicious critique of my high notes. In doing so he is damaging me intensely».

⁷⁵. *Straßburger Post*, 2 October 1912.

⁷⁶. Otto to Legband, 12 April 1918; Otto to the mayor's office, 16 April 1918; AMS 180MW99.

⁷⁷. Helene Senken to the theatre management, 27 January 1918; AMS 180MW99.

audience opinion and should therefore be taken seriously⁷⁸. But simultaneously critics often disparaged popular opinion, which, as another critic remarked, would recognize the truly good only rarely⁷⁹. Even the critic of the socialist *Freie Presse* was suspicious of the musical taste of his readers: «Gewöhnlich geht der Geschmack des allgemeinen Publikums und des Musikkenners auseinander, denn ersteres besitzt einen unausrottbaren Hang zur Banalität»⁸⁰.

One of the recurring themes in the Strasbourg reviews that point to a rift between critical opinion and audience reaction concerned the applause. Sometimes this concerned audience reactions which critics deemed inappropriate, like shouts of «Donnerwetter, das ist eine kolossale Leistung»⁸¹. Mostly, however, they complained about the audience's lack of involvement. A little bit more enthusiasm, the *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung* repeatedly stated, would encourage the soloists and therefore benefit the momentum of the entire performance⁸². Especially in operas with separate numbers the audience should not let the opportunity pass to express their enthusiasm immediately after the close of such a set piece, the same paper observed two years later⁸³. Even in operettas, one of his colleagues complained, the audience was only prepared to applaud at the end of each act, which badly affected the general atmosphere of the performance: «Autant une pareille réserve est méritoire dans les grandes œuvres musicales, autant elle est peu indiquée pour les opérettes où quelques applaudissements par-ci par-là — surtout s'ils sont mérités — ne peuvent que favoriser l'entrain général»⁸⁴. In spite of his often severe judgements even Altmann deplored the «Straßburger Kühle» («Strasbourg aloofness») that often prevailed, even in well-attended performances⁸⁵.

The reviews also show that concerning the repertoire audience preferences and critical opinion were quite divided. Whereas many opera goers enjoyed the works of Meyerbeer, Verdi, and Thomas, the critics had few warm words for them. The latter's *Mignon*, one critic noted, was popular only with those opera goers who like «a sweet melody, or better, a saccharine melody» above anything else⁸⁶. Another critic remarked that each time *Mignon* appeared on the schedule he would think of the dialogue in Beethoven's String Quartet Opus 135 «Muß es sein? Es muß sein!», opining that without doubt financial considerations constituted the most pressing reason to perform an opera

⁷⁸. *Der Volksbote*, 13 October 1902.

⁷⁹. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 19 September 1900.

⁸⁰. *Freie Presse*, 16 October 1905. Translation: «The preferences of the general public are usually at variance with those of the musical connoisseur, because the former has an indestructible penchant for banality».

⁸¹. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 11 December 1893. Translation: «Damn, that is a colossal achievement».

⁸². *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 3 April 1895.

⁸³. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 22 December 1897.

⁸⁴. *Journal d'Alsace et Lorraine*, 25 September 1905.

⁸⁵. *Straßburger Post*, 3 March 1909.

⁸⁶. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 23 September 1903.

that consisted only of «superficialities»⁸⁷. The most popular Verdi operas in the Strasbourg repertoire, *Der Troubadour* and *La Traviata*, were characterized as «hurdy-gurdy»-music («Leierkastenmusik»), whereas Meyerbeer was often accused of generating only shallow effects, along the lines of Wagner's critique, sometimes with a clearly anti-Semite note as well. As the critic «Erasmus» wrote: «Ein dummer Text zu einer nichtssagenden Musik, das ist die Afrikanerin. [...] Beim Anhören solcher Kunstwerke kann man es Wagner nachfühlen, daß er eine Broschüre über das Judentum in der Musik schreiben mußte»⁸⁸. Four years later his successor at this newspaper motivated his condemnation along similar lines: «Meyerbeer ist der markante Typus eines jüdischen Komponisten, denen Wagner die schöpferische, Neues gestaltende Genialität abspricht. Unerreicht ist er in der Erfindung neuer Effekte, sowohl instrumentaler als vokaler; er dient dem schlechtesten Geschmacke und appelliert an die niedersten Bedürfnisse des Genießens»⁸⁹. Another critic resorted to racist stereotypes to explain the triviality of the *Troubadour's* music: «Stellte man zum Beispiel der Soldaten tapferes Kriegslied aus dem dritten Akt einer Niggerband zur Verfügung, sie machte ohne Aenderung einen 'Original Nigger dance' mit einem Text voll 'love' und 'Darling' draus, der in drei Tagen die Welt erobert hätte»⁹⁰.

Not all reviews were that vitriolic. Indeed, most critics ended their diatribes against Meyerbeer or Verdi by conceding that despite all the obvious weaknesses their operas did contain some attractive arias. With such conciliatory remarks they tried to explain that these works maintained themselves in the repertoire. Most of all, however, reviews like these show that there was a big difference between what the critics appreciated and what the audience, which they claimed to represent, preferred.

This notion also applied the other way round. Some works, and especially German ones, were routinely praised into the skies. As might be expected, Wagner's works were generally considered to be the pinnacle in music (or opera) history, but critics would also hail on more than one occasion pieces like *Orpheus*, *Die Zauberflöte*, and *Der Freischütz* because they were so purely German. Yet no work was approached with more reverence than Beethoven's *Fidelio*. A performance of this piece, the *Straßburger Post* claimed, would

⁸⁷. *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 4 November 1908.

⁸⁸. *Der Volksbote*, 5 October 1903. Translation: «A dumb text with meaningless music, that is *Die Afrikanerin*. [...] When one listens to such works of art, one can understand why Wagner felt the need to write a brochure on Judaism in music».

⁸⁹. *Der Volksbote*, 25 November 1907. Translation: «Meyerbeer is the characteristic example of the Jewish composer, who, according to Wagner, lacks the creative genius that shapes the new. He was unsurpassed in creating new effects, both instrumental as well as vocal ones; he caters to the worst taste and appeals to the lowest needs of enjoyment».

⁹⁰. *Straßburger neue Zeitung*, 7 March 1910. Translation: «If one would hand over the brave war song of the soldiers from the third act to a nigger band, then without changing a thing they would transform it into an 'original nigger dance' with a text full of 'love' and 'darling' that would probably achieve world fame within three days».

always be the touchstone for the artistic quality of any opera stage⁹¹. For other critics it was a «sacred» opera⁹², «one of the holiest possessions in German music»⁹³, or even «a religion of its own»⁹⁴. One of their his colleagues labelled it the most German opera for another reason: «Die Apotheose der Weiblichkeit, wie sie der ‘Fidelio’ in unvergänglicher Schönheit repräsentirt und wie sie gerade von Beethoven’s Hand gezeichnet unendlich rührend zu unserem Herzen spricht, sie ist eben ein urdeutscher Gedanke»⁹⁵. Although it hardly seems possible, even more exalted rhetoric dominated the reviews for a special performance on 20 November 1905 with new sets to commemorate the first performance of the piece, hundred years ago. But this evening was also special in another respect: the theatre was filled with a capacity audience, something which normally never happened with *Fidelio*. From the box office reports it is unmistakably clear that *Fidelio* enjoyed only moderate popularity with Strasbourg opera goers; the financial results were mostly average at best and mediocre at worst. The same can be said about *Der Freischütz*, also a piece that the press routinely hailed as one of the most precious jewels from the German opera repertoire, its rather modest attractiveness to opera audiences notwithstanding.

If the Strasbourg opera critics had it in for general audiences, they reserved special scorn for two specific audience categories, the first of which was the so-called Sunday audience. On this day, Altmann noted, an exchange of population took place: the city dwellers left, longing to be in nature, whereas the people from the countryside went to town looking for enjoyments and pleasures not available in their own environment⁹⁶. Already in 1892 the *Straßburger Post* complained that Sunday audiences were not overly critical⁹⁷ — an assumption that over the years became one the most repeated clichés in the opera reviews⁹⁸. Some critics even made fun of Sunday audiences, noting that their lack of experience with theatrical performances made them particularly naive, for instance during the famous Wolf’s Glen scene in *Der Freischütz*: «Quant à la mise en scène de la *Wolfsschlucht*, elle a témoigné de beaucoup de bonne volonté et, quoique terriblement naïve et enfantine, elle a fait se pâmer de plaisir les nombreux spectateurs campagnards, qui, le chapeau sur la tête, contemplaient, bouche bée, du haut du paradis, les illuminations électriques des têtes de morts et les grotesques apparitions de squelettes chevauchant sur des sangliers»⁹⁹.

⁹¹. *Straßburger Post*, 2 November 1901.

⁹². *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 5 October 1900.

⁹³. *Straßburger Zeitung*, 27 September 1907.

⁹⁴. *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 28 October 1904.

⁹⁵. *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 5 October 1900. Translation: «The apotheosis of femininity, as *Fidelio* represents it in eternal beauty, and as it endlessly moves our heart in Beethoven’s portrayal, is a purely German thought».

⁹⁶. *Straßburger Post*, 18 April 1911.

⁹⁷. *Straßburger Post*, 17 October 1892.

⁹⁸. See e.g. *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 23 November 1908.

⁹⁹. *Journal d’Alsace et Lorraine*, 5 April 1904.

Consequently, «Sunday ovations» («Sonntagsbeifallspenden») became the routinely used term to describe and to disparage this audience's appreciation for the performers¹⁰⁰. After all, the critics argued, irrespective of the scheduled works, this audience would visit the theatre anyway, determined to have a pleasant evening¹⁰¹.

The critics especially deplored the theatre management's readiness to cater to the tastes of this weekly audience by programming works of lesser quality. When in the 1900–1901 season *Die Hugenotten* was performed, two critics noted that a piece like this would still draw in the crowds, provided it was scheduled on a Sunday¹⁰². But that, as another critic remarked, was exactly the problem: without Sundays and its inexperienced audiences there would be no reason anymore for the theatre management to mount Meyerbeer's operas¹⁰³. Shortly before, his colleague had found some strong words to denounce scheduling *Mignon* on Sundays by claiming that for a large portion of Sunday audiences the difference between a municipal theatre and a circus or variety fair lay only in the former's size, location, and personnel¹⁰⁴. Moreover, some argued, the theatre also served an educational purpose, so it should not offer «trash- and horror-dramas» («Schund- und Schauerdramen») like *Die Jüdin* or *Der Troubadour* to an audience that yet had to develop solid standards of artistic understanding¹⁰⁵. However, when the theatre did schedule the worthier works these critics preferred, there were protests from other ones. Altmann stated that it made no sense to bring *Siegfried* on a Sunday, because Sunday audiences would prefer something easier to digest¹⁰⁶. A few weeks later his arguments were echoed by his colleague from the *Freie Presse*, who condemned scheduling *Tristan und Isolde* on a Sunday for exactly the same reason¹⁰⁷.

Even worse, however, than the typical Sunday audience was the second category: women. Whereas the male visitor tended to value the artistic value of the performer, the female would primarily be interested in the looks of a performer, many critics claimed. A typical example was the report about a guest performance of Max Alvary as Siegfried. As soon as he appeared on stage, an anonymous critic wrote, the ladies in the house could no longer leave their opera glasses in peace and throughout the house one would hear them comment on Alvary's beautiful appearance. It was a good thing, this scribe continued, that Alvary performed in Strasbourg only rarely, because otherwise «our ladies» would not be able to think about anything else and would forget about their other duties. He was particularly alarmed by the fact that when in the third act Alvary in his role as Siegfried

¹⁰⁰. See e.g. *Freie Presse*, 26 September 1899; *Journal d'Alsace et de Lorraine*, 9 April 1901.

¹⁰¹. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 12 December 1910.

¹⁰². *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 25 February 1901.

¹⁰³. *Straßburger Zeitung*, 25 November 1907.

¹⁰⁴. *Der Volksbote*, 4 November 1907.

¹⁰⁵. *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 19 February 1906.

¹⁰⁶. *Straßburger Post*, 20 February 1911.

¹⁰⁷. *Freie Presse*, 17 April 1911.

kissed Brünnhilde for several minutes, the passions of the female audience had reached boiling point¹⁰⁸.

Even without talking about actual performances the critics noted often enough that the main requisite for successfully performing certain roles was the ability to capture the adoration of the female part of the audience, especially the «Backfische» (young adolescent girls) and the «höhere Töchter» (daughters from a middle-class household with aspirations for social ascent, mostly through cultural education). The mark of a real Lohengrin-performer, Altmann claimed, was that he be able to transport the «Backfische» into raptures¹⁰⁹. For the same reason the soloist who took the title role in *Der Rattenfänger von Hameln* received praise: he had moved the hearts of the girls and the ladies¹¹⁰.

But critics also noted that catering to female taste did not help maintaining artistic standards. An opera like *Mignon*, the *Straßburger Zeitung* concluded, appealed especially to sentimental personalities, which made it understandable that each performance of this piece attracted the circles of the most sensitive femininity¹¹¹.

The nefarious effects of female taste on the repertoire were especially associated with the popularity of the operas of Viktor Nessler. Although most of his works enjoyed only moderate success, his *Der Trompeter von Säckingen* (1884) was the biggest hit of the decade, something most German critics found difficult to stomach. As Hanslick noted, the most remarkable thing about this otherwise totally unremarkable work was its success¹¹². Initially, the Strasbourg press had joined the general enthusiasm about the work¹¹³. In the following decades local critics, whilst increasingly conceding that meanwhile the opera might come across old-fashioned, had continued to plead its cause, in part because Nessler had been born in the Alsace and hence his work should be cultivated in Strasbourg¹¹⁴, but also because it had acquired a place German opera history¹¹⁵. Yet, the work's reputation declined. Compared to the freshness of the *Meistersinger*, one critic stated, *Der Trompeter* today appeared stale, sentimental, and syrupy¹¹⁶.

Looking back on Nessler's faded popularity one critic looked for explanations in the composer's appearance:

Ich glaube den älteren Damen gerne, daß sie für ihn geschwärmt – einst!
Ich würde es auch jüngeren glauben [...] Ein so schöner Bart!! Seine prächtige

¹⁰⁸. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 11 December 1893.

¹⁰⁹. *Straßburger Post*, 8 October 1906.

¹¹⁰. *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 9 January 1903.

¹¹¹. *Straßburger Zeitung*, 23 September 1903.

¹¹². HANSLICK 1888, pp. 69–76.

¹¹³. See e.g. *Straßburger Post*, 15 September 1886.

¹¹⁴. *Straßburger Post*, 9 January 1903; 27 December 1905.

¹¹⁵. *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 27 December 1903.

¹¹⁶. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 28 December 1904.

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Gestalt, sein lebenswürdiges Wesen, seine stete Heiterkeit, Freundlichkeit, seine Güte mußten ihm ja die Qualifikation des offiziellen Schwarms geben. Denn Neßler war ein ehrenwerter Mann. Und seine Werke, seine Stücke; denen merkte jedes weibliche Herz an, daß sie aus der 'Tiefe des deutschen Gemüts' kamen. Wie treu und opferfreudig sind die weiblichen Heldinnen seiner Opern, wie herzensgut, tapfer und edel die Helden, so darinnen sind!¹¹⁷

Continuing to perform *Der Trompeter* could only be defended by recognizing that there were still certain audiences that liked them. Schlesinger raised this point, when he conceded that this opera typically appealed to Sunday audiences, which had come to town and just wanted to take in an opera¹¹⁸. Indeed, in 1905 two critics defended scheduling this opera for Christmas performances, because the work still managed to move the hearts of the «Backfische»¹¹⁹, and especially a good-looking performer of the title role would make the hearts of the «Backfische» and the «höhere Töchter» beat just that little bit faster¹²⁰. Yet, as Altmann noted, the female devotion to Nessler came at a price: «Wo immer der blonde, schnurrbartgezierte Trompeter, der unwiderstehliche “Rattenfänger” ihre Lieder erschallen ließen, nahmen sie das große Publikum und von diesem besonders den weiblichen Teil so gefangen, daß die guten Klassiker Gluck, Mozart, Beethoven, die Weber, Lortzing, Nicolai u. A. mehr weinend ihr Haupt verhüllten und auf bessere Zeiten warteten»¹²¹.

All their remarks show that the critics, as much as they liked to claim to represent the audience, were hardly speaking for the audience. This ambiguity was best summarized by Altmann when he defended his critical writings: «Der Sänger, der eine uns ans Herz gewachsene Rolle droben zum Zerrbild gestaltet, muß es [...] hinnehmen, wenn das Publikum durch den Mund der Kritik — und diese ist durchaus nichts weiter als das Sprachrohr der kunstsinnigen Hörerschaft! — über Minderwertigkeiten öffentlich quittiert»¹²². The problem was that in the opinion of Altmann and many of his colleagues

¹¹⁷. *Straßburger neue Zeitung*, 7 November 1910. Translation: «I can understand that the elderly ladies used to be crazy about him – once! I could also understand it for the younger ones... Such a beautiful beard!! His stately bearing, his pleasant character, his unwavering cheerfulness, friendliness, his goodness must have qualified him as an official idol. Nessler was indeed a man of honour. And his works, his pieces; every female heart must have recognized straightaway that they came from the «the depth of German nature». How faithful and ready to make sacrifices are the female heroines from his operas, how good-natured, brave, and noble are their heroes!».

¹¹⁸. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 29 March 1910.

¹¹⁹. *Straßburger Bürgerzeitung*, 27 December 1905.

¹²⁰. *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 27 December 1905.

¹²¹. *Straßburger Zeitung*, 9 January 1903. Translation: «Wherever the blonde trumpeter with his beard, or the irresistible pied piper performed their songs, they captivated the general audience and especially the female part of it to such a degree, that the good classics Gluck, Mozart, Beethoven, Weber, Lortzing, Nicolai, and others covered their faces, almost weeping, and waited for better times to come».

¹²². *Straßburger Zeitung*, 18 October 1902. Translation: «The singer, who makes a travesty out of a role that is dear to us, must accept it when the audience speaks openly about inferiorities via the critic – and he is nothing

only a small portion of the audience consisted of such «art-loving listeners» — and the majority of the latter were the critics.

CONCLUSION

«Das Kritisieren ist — der liebe Leser wird uns das aufs Wort glauben! — ein saures Amt»¹²³. The relation between press and the municipal authority, the theatre management, the artists, and the audience can make us understand the frustration and resignation that speak from this remark. The Strasbourg critics considered themselves art devotees who were willing to lend a helping hand, basing their advice on their wide experience with opera performance and their knowledge of current debate on music and opera. Their efforts, however, were not appreciated. The municipal authority and the theatre management considered the press insensitive and unwilling to acknowledge what could be achieved under local circumstances. Simultaneously, the artists were upset by the slightest critical remarks, and the audience was not inclined to let its tastes be determined or changed by the artistic standards the reviews routinely preached.

This summary shows that the press was basically speaking for itself, but it does not help us to solve the quandary that Luhmann identified. As the latter acknowledged, as source for information, the press (or any other type of media) is an absolute necessity; sometimes it is even the only source a (music) historian has¹²⁴. What this contribution aims to show, however, is that we might transcend the ultimately unanswerable dichotomy true/untrue. Instead we can look at media, in this case opera reviews, for clues of self-reflection that may tell us something about the thinking behind the observations they offer, in this case, by analyzing how the Strasbourg opera critics, who considered themselves an essential part of local operatic practice, positioned themselves against the other parties involved. This means not using reviews first and foremost to answer research questions we might have about historical performance practice, but to take them seriously in their entirety. The lengthy introductions about the composer and the performed works, combined with the references to other writings about them, may then be interpreted as the critic's deliberate attempt to foreground his knowledge and to stake his claim that his judgement will indeed be a sound one. The same goes for the detailed comments on the performance of the soloists and the observations on inaccuracies in the staging, which might be considered as a source for performance practice but perhaps even more as the critic's attempt to position himself amidst the entire system of opera production as a well-meaning advisor.

more than the mouthpiece of the art-loving listeners».

¹²³. *Straßburger neueste Nachrichten*, 17 February 1908. Translation: «To be a critic — our dear readers may take our word for it! — is an unpleasant duty».

¹²⁴. See e.g. GOT 1997 which is almost completely based on press material.

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Simultaneously, from the many remarks about audience taste and reactions we might draw clues of the critic's self-understanding in relation to the audience. By thus focusing on the discursive strategy in the writings of music critics, we may move away from the uncertain business of using them as often uncorroborated source material — without denying that there always be cases, where doing so is simply unavoidable —, provided we are prepared to accept that these writings are primarily a valuable source about the press itself.

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